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Adolescents and their mothers as conversational partners across socio-cultural contexts

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents some findings of a cross-cultural research project on everyday family interactions with teenagers in Estonia, Finland, and Sweden – North European cultures that have all been traditionally characterized as relatively silent and reserved in comparison with other European nations. The three mono-cultural groups consisted of 17 Estonian, 19 Swedish, and 18 Finnish families living in their country of origin; the two bicultural and bilingual groups consisted of 18 Estonian and 18 Finnish families residing in Sweden. The results revealed that little talk characterizes all Estonian and Finnish families, whereas the Swedish mothers living in Sweden talked a lot. The Estonian mothers living in Estonia tended to be more concerned with controlling their children's behavior, and elicited conversation from teenagers more frequently. At the same time, the Swedish mono-cultural teenagers were more talkative and more active in controlling their mothers' behavior than their counterparts, exhibiting a higher degree of symmetrical mother-child interaction than their Estonian and Finnish counterparts.

Finally, the discussion focuses on possible reasons and consequences of cultural variability in teenagers' and their mothers' conversational style.

Running head: adolescents and their mothers

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family interactions with teenagers in Estonia, Finland, and Sweden – North European cultures that have all been traditionally characterized as relatively silent and reserved in comparison with other European nations.

Cultural variations in interaction between mother and child

The culture in which children are raised has a great influence on the ways mothers talk with their offspring. The amount of mothers' and children's talk has been shown to differ along different societies, as well as how much talking is socially acceptable in particular situations (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Research on mother-child interaction has consistently found mothers from the U.S., particularly of European American background, to be more talkative and expecting more talk from their children than mothers from other, particularly non-Western cultures (Bornstein, Tal & Tamis-LeMonda, 1991; Clancy, 1986; Fernald & Morikawa, 1993). Furthermore, numerous studies made in Anglo-European contexts – in the United States and Great Britain – have demonstrated that mothers differ in terms of whether they are more concerned with eliciting children's conversational participation, or with directing their children's behavior (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991; McDonald & Pien, 1982). According to literature, social class plays a considerable role in determining the ways how mothers talk with their children (see Hoff-Ginsberg, & Tardif, 1995, for an overview). Smaller amount of talk and direct control of the children in everyday

activities has been treated as something typical only of working-class mothers (Hart, & Risley, 1992; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991; Hoff-Ginsberg, & Tardif, 1995; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Middle-class mothers, in turn, have been characterized by being concerned rather with eliciting children's conversational participation than with the aim to control their behavior. These studies report also that the maternal speech has an effect on child development. Children with highly directive mothers have been found to be likely to have lower achievement test scores, IQ scores, and achievement motivation (see Masur, & Turner, 2001; Pan, Imbens-Bailey, Winner, & Snow, 1996), and less developed language skills (Barnes, Gutfreund, Satterly, & Wells, 1983; Huttenlocher, Haight, Bryk, Seltzer, & Lyons, 1991; Pine, 1994) than children with mothers who themselves talk more and elicit more talk from their children.

At the same time, it is known that people in some societies or even in some ethnic subgroups in the U.S. (e.g., the East Asian Americans) talk generally less because they have different cultural practices and meanings of talk and silence than the rather talkative European Americans (Kim, and Markus, 2002). Findings of studies made in other socio-cultural background are sometimes not consistent with middle-class parent-child interaction pattern reported in Anglo-American studies. For example, little talk and strict control was typical of Estonian middle-class mothers (Junefelt & Tulviste, 1997; Tulviste, 2000). The findings challenged the view that the controlling maternal style is something typical of the working class, and conversation-eliciting maternal style is—in contrast—a characteristically middle-class phenomenon (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). In the current study, we were interested in seeing whether the pattern of language use that has been found in Estonia – i.e., talking little and being directive – characterizes also the conversational style of mothers from other ethnic groups in the stereotypically silent Scandinavian and North European region.

To date, within-culture research on mother-child interaction has clearly shown that mother's speech to the child is related to the child's age.

Mothers of younger children have been found to exhibit a more directive style. As children get older, their mothers start to use fewer directives and to phrase them in a more indirect manner (Halle & Schatz, 1994; Schneiderman, 1983). Unfortunately most research on mother-child interactions is limited to the families with infants, toddlers and preschool-age children. Relatively little is known about interactions between mothers and adolescents (Nippold, 1988). It holds true also about the research on mother-child interaction done from a cross-cultural perspective. At the same time, the major growth in pragmatic competence, i.e., the ability to use the language in various contexts in socially and culturally appropriate ways, takes place during early adolescence and adolescence (Cooper & Anderson-Inman, 1988).

The current study

The study compared adolescents and their mothers as conversational partners in three neighbouring countries around the Baltic Sea: Estonia, Finland, and Sweden. These countries have a number of similarities, such as low population density, Nordic mentality, and prevalently Protestant morale. All the nations involved in our study have been characterized by previous research as "silent" and less talkative than other nations (Daun (1996; Lehtonen & Sajavaara, 1985; Sajavaara & Lehtonen, 1997). Estonians and Finns are similar also in respect of their languages. They speak cognate Finno-Ugric languages, and are able to understand each others' language.

Sweden is a special country by its long traditions of "equality ideology", where children from early on are treated as equal persons to other family members and their independence is frequently stressed (Daun, 1991). In a recent comparative study, the Swedish mothers differed from mothers from 15 other European countries as least strict in child-rearing. Estonia, in contrast, is a country with a history of 50 years of Soviet occupation, where since regained independence in 1991 rapid political, societal, and economical transformations are taking place. Especially interesting is the comparison of Estonian family interaction

pattern with those in neighbouring countries like Finland and Sweden with which Estonia is re-establishing the close historical and cultural bonds that were destroyed by the occupation.

In the current study, family interactions were videorecorded at family meals, as several studies (Ochs, Pontecorvo, & Fasulo, 1996; Tannen 1984) have reported the importance of “dinner talk” in language socialization (see Aukrust & Snow, 1998; Pan, Perlman, & Snow, 2000, for reviews), and the existence of subtle cultural differences in it (Aukrust & Snow, 1998; Blum-Kulka, 1990, 1997; Ochs et al., 1996; Tannen, 1984). The three mono-cultural groups consisted of 17 Estonian, 19 Swedish, and 18 Finnish families living in their country of origin; the two bicultural and bilingual groups consisted of 18 Estonian and 18 Finnish families residing in Sweden. All families were from middle-class or upper middle class, and had early adolescent children with mean age $M=10.93$, $SD=1.08$ across the samples.

Of particular interest here was how *talkative* mothers and early adolescents actually are at their homes, measured by the average number of utterances per minute, and the *communicative intents* (to control vs. to converse) expressed by them. According to some previous studies (Halle & Shatz, 1994; McDonald & Pien, 1982; Tulviste, 2000), regulatory utterances were identified and coded according to their communicative intention into following categories:

1. *behavioral directives*: utterances that involve giving commands or permission, requesting or encouraging desirable action, or preventing the conversational partner from acting were identified in each of the transcripts. The sentence form of directive utterances was coded as either *imperative* (‘Have some salad!’), *modified imperative* (‘Please wash [your] hands!’), ‘Give it [the paper] to me so I can see what those dates are’), *declarative* (‘You have a nice moustache [from the milk]’), or *question* (‘What’s the hurry?’).

2. *conversation-eliciting utterances*: utterances that attempt to elicit a verbal response from the conversational partner (‘What happened to her?’).

The study found that the pattern of parent-child interaction differed across five samples. The Estonian and Finnish mothers both from their countries of origin and from Sweden were similar in respect of the small amount of talk – the Estonians talked as little as the stereotypically taciturn Finns (Tulviste, Mizera, and De Geer, 2003b). An unexpected finding was that the Swedes – originally also treated as “silent Scandinavians” – talked as much as the European American mothers from a previous study (Tulviste, 2000). Frequent control of teenagers’ behavior at family meals was typical only of mothers in Estonia. They differed in their strong tendency of being concerned with controlling the child’s behavior also from the bicultural Estonian mothers residing in Sweden (Tulviste, Mizera, and De Geer, 2004; Tulviste, Mizera, De Geer, and Tryggvason, 2003a). At the same time, mothers from both Estonian samples were similar in respect of using direct forms of regulatory language. The most frequent form of behavioral directives by Estonian mothers both from their country of origin and from Sweden was imperatives (56% and 46%, respectively). In the Finnish monolingual sample, modified imperatives were the most frequent type of directives (44%). The Swedish mothers seemed to favour more indirect forms of regulatory language over direct (questions and declaratives), using imperatives very seldom (Tulviste et al., 2004). Mothers from both Estonian samples differed from Finnish and Swedish mothers by using a lot of conversation-eliciting utterances (Tulviste et al., 2004). They encouraged talking as frequently as the U.S mothers in our previous study (Tulviste, 2000).

Similarly to their mothers, the Swedish monolingual adolescents differed from the Finno-Ugric samples by talking more (Tulviste et al., 2003b). They were as talkative as the European American teenagers in our previous study (Tulviste, 2000). At the same time, all teenagers were similar in being not concerned with controlling their mothers’ behavior. The European American teenagers were likely to direct more of behavioral directives towards their mothers (Tulviste, 2000). As to the frequency of using conversation-eliciting utter-

ances, the American teenagers did not differ from the teenagers participating in the current study, except the Estonian adolescents living in Sweden, who elicited mothers' conversational participation less than all others.

Although all samples were similar in mother's conversational dominance over adolescents, the finding that Swedish monolingual adolescents produced significantly more talk than their counterparts presumably shows that adolescents in Swedish monolingual families are more equal conversational partners to their mothers than in other samples. The Estonian monocultural mothers, in turn, appear to be the least equal conversational partners to their adolescents, and they seem to exercise somewhat less democratic and more traditional socialization styles than Finnish and Swedish mothers.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results of the study reported here demonstrated both similarities and differences in adolescents and their mothers as conversational partners stemming from the characteristics of socio-cultural context. Little talk appeared to be something typical of all Finno-Ugric samples, but was extraordinary among Swedish monocultural families. The Estonian mothers' directive style of conversation, in turn, appeared to be a unique phenomenon among the participants of our research. It was not even typical of mothers who shared the same linguistic system (Estonian language) but lived in another country – in Sweden. The Swedish monolingual teenagers were most active in controlling their mothers' behavior, exhibiting a higher degree of symmetrical mother-child interaction than their Estonian and Finnish counterparts. The following discussion concentrates mainly on found cultural differences, their possible antecedents and consequences.

Possible reasons for variations in adolescents' and their mothers' conversational style

There is still considerably more research on mother-child interaction than on the factors responsible for variation in it, or the possible outcomes of it. The results of the current study provided some additional information to the

language vs. culture debate. According to our studies, the amount of produced talk seems to depend more on the specific language than on the immediate culture, because it was something that characterized all Finno-Ugric samples and did not seem to depend on whether they lived in Sweden, Estonia or Finland. In previous research on maternal child-directed speech talking less and being directive have been seen as something that go hand in hand. Our Finnish data demonstrated that a pattern of conversation where a person did not talk much, but when talking did not strive to control the conversational partner's behavior, was also possible. In addition, current results showed that the directive conversational style of the Estonian mothers seemed not to be determined only by some embedded characteristics of the Estonian language. Both Estonians and Finns speak cognate Finno-Ugric languages that have many similar characteristics (both are agglutinating languages, both have a large number of cases—14 in Estonian and 15 in Finnish language, both lack grammatical future and grammatical gender, etc.). At the same time, the Finnish mothers did not use behavioral directives frequently while talking with their teenagers.

Equality/non-equality of family members

Several findings in our study seemed to reflect the fact that teenagers in Swedish monocultural families were more equal conversational partners to their family members than their peers in other samples, whereas parent-child relationships in other samples, especially in Estonian monocultural families seem not to be transformed from parent-dominated to a more egalitarian and independent. Specifically, the Swedish monolingual adolescents talked significantly more, and directed significantly more behavioral directives towards their mothers, whereas the Estonian and Finnish adolescents tended to control their mothers' behavior significantly less than their counterparts living in Sweden. The Estonian monocultural teenagers received significantly more behavioral directives than the others (Tulviste, 2004). The findings indicating that Estonian adolescents were less equal conversational partners than

their Swedish peers may express a more general cultural belief system, namely, the Swedish “equality ideology” (see Welles-Nyström, 1996), but might be also partly due to the Estonian parents’ upbringing.

The heritage of the imposed Soviet socialization ideology

The bigger asymmetry of conversations between mothers and adolescents in Estonian monocultural families might have partly stemmed from the mothers’ upbringing in a totalitarian society – in the former Soviet Union – with its stress on conforming and adjusting to the communist system and uniform socialization ideology. According to another possible explanation, living behind the so-called iron curtain, the Estonian mothers were sheltered from the rather modern ideas of democratic upbringing gaining ground in other Nordic countries. The hypotheses of the influence of totalitarian society was not supported in the study comparing Estonian and Latvian maternal conversational style, showing that mothers in Latvia – in a country with similar history as Estonia – were not concerned with controlling their teenagers’ behavior (see Tulviste, 2004). Anyhow, our data demonstrated that the exposure to the Western values and norms in Estonia that started in 1991 had not brought about a noticeable shift in socialization patterns into more modern and/or democratic ones, and changed – among other things – the pattern of Estonian maternal language used while conversing with their teenagers. It is possible that considerably longer time is needed for such changes.

Cultural variations of child-rearing goals

Differences in maternal conversational style have been frequently ascribed to differences in maternal beliefs and values about the nature of the child and his/her development, about children’s place in the community, and about the parental role as such (Clancy, 1986; Heath, 1983; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984), that, in turn, have been related to parents belonging to different socioeconomic strata. The current study showed that little talk and directive

conversational style cannot be explained by the socioeconomic status of mothers as it was customary in previous Anglo-American research. All mothers who participated in our study, including the monocultural Estonians who talked little and were highly directive, had middle or upper middle class backgrounds. At the same time, the differences have been reported in child-rearing values and goals hold by Estonian, Finnish, and Swedish mothers of 4-6 yr. old children (Tulviste, Mizera, De Geer, and Tryggvason, submitted). The questionnaire data showed that the main cultural differences was that the Estonian mothers gave the highest ratings, but the Swedish mothers the lowest ratings to the characteristics related to conformity values (e.g., politeness, respect for adults, obedience, responsibility). The Finns emphasized these goals more than the Swedes but less than the Estonians did. The Swedish and Finnish mothers’ child-rearing goals were relatively homogeneous. In contrast, the Estonian mothers were generally less focused on any specific goal, and had high expectations for their children’s characteristics and behavior, wanting them to possess as well characteristics related to conformity as those related to self-maximization (independence, believing in his/her abilities, freedom of actions, creativity, choosing one’s goals, curiosity, success). The Swedes and Finns mentioned frequently hedonistic values typical of a welfare consumer society, like being happy and merry. The Estonian mothers did it seldom. The finding that Finns were more likely than the Swedes to emphasize characteristics related to conformity gives the impression that changes towards more democratic socialization styles (from parental emphasis on obedience to emphasis on autonomy and self-direction) have not been as extensive in Finland than in Sweden. Several studies support the view. Swedish mothers have found to differ from mothers from 15 other European countries as less strict in their childrearing practicing, by giving more freedom to children and giving less support for conformist behavior and obedience (see Dahlberg 1992). Daun, Mattlar and Alanen (1999) found that the Finnish communication pattern is considerably more hierarchical and less de-

mocratic than the Swedish one. A comparative study about mothers' own value preferences showed that scoring lowest on the Schwartz values of self-direction (see Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987) the monocultural Estonian and Finnish mothers did not differ significantly from each other, while the results established once more the Swedish mothers' strongest emphasis on self-direction (Mizera, unpublished material). Even the Estonian mothers in Sweden were shown to value achievement and self-direction significantly higher than mothers in Estonia (Tulviste & Kants, 2001). Of course, besides factors discussed above there might be several other cultural factors that play an important role in determination of cultural variability in child-rearing values. A research on child-rearing goals of Estonian mothers concerning children of different age (2 to 15 yrs.) found that the biggest differences in maternal child-rearing goals were between mothers whose children go to school and those whose children are younger (Tulviste, unpublished material). Namely, mothers of toddlers and preschool children (2-6 yrs.) valued characteristics related to self-direction and hedonism more highly and conformity less highly than those of older (7-15 yrs. old) children. The findings seem to reflect parents' attempt to assist their children in adapting to the to high demands at school. It is also likely that the finding reflects the fact that although Estonia has been undergoing rapid societal changes, changes of schools towards democratization have not been as rapid.

Potential consequences of mothers' conversational style

Previous research had found that Estonian middle-class mothers tend to talk less and be more directive in comparison with toddlers' mothers' in Sweden and the U.S. (Junefelt & Tulviste, 1997), and with mothers of adolescents in the U.S. (Tulviste, 2000). The current study compared mothers and teenagers as conversational partners in Estonia, Finland, and Sweden – North European cultures that have all been traditionally characterized as relatively silent. The study found that little talk was not extraordinary among many of the participants

of our research. Specifically, it appeared to be something typical of all Finno-Ugric samples. Swedish families, in contrast, tended to talk a lot. The directive style of conversation of Estonian monocultural mothers, in turn, appeared to be a unique phenomenon among middle-class mothers.

An intriguing question is, to what degree little talk and the directive conversational style influences the development of language, as well as social and cognitive development in the child in such countries where it is typical even of middle-class mothers' speech. A previous comparative study with 2-year-olds (Junefelt & Tulviste, 1998) demonstrated that the Estonian mothers' strategy of encouraging toddlers to be attentive and to concentrate on the ongoing activity using a lot of imperatives made Estonian children more successful while solving the puzzle tasks than American children. However, the same strategy may not be the best from the point of view of children's language development. The finding that Estonian toddlers and teenagers indeed spoke less than their counterparts from other countries was not surprising. It could be seen as a consequence of the fact that their mothers had expected less verbalization from them and had been more concerned with controlling their behavior.

There are somehow contradicting views about the role that the maternal control of children's behavior may play in child development. Some authors have seen mothers' directiveness as a response to the child's seeming lack of self-directed behavior. Low-income mothers tend to direct their children's behavior more frequently (Farran and Haskins, 1980), whereas their children, in turn, are less frequently involved in activities lacking parental supervision than children in middle-income families. From the socio-cultural perspective, lack of self-directed behavior in children seems to be rather a result of too little behavioral control from their parents. From parenting style studies it is also well known that too little control could cause problems with self-control, self-regulation and self-confidence. Many other studies have reported, in opposite, that highly controlling parents tend to have children with

lower achievement test scores, IQ scores and achievement motivation (see above). Thus, all these contradicting results seem to lead us to a conclusion that there is bound to exist some optimal amount of maternal regulatory speech that is also determined by the child's individual characteristics and the tasks' difficulty. It seems to depend on whether the cognitive, linguistic, physical, etc., abilities of the child make her/him capable of performing certain activities on her/his own or not, and on the amount of maternal help the child is perceived to need. During the past decades, the theorists argue that an important parental task is facilitating the child's exploration of values rather than demanding rigid conformity to parental values (see Grusec & Goodnow, 1994, Grusec & Kuczynski, 1997). Thus, children get things explained to them and negotiations are highly encouraged. The fact that directive conversational style was typical of the teenagers' mothers in Estonia whose teenagers definitely managed without so much control at the family meals supports the notion that the ways of using language while interacting with children are culture-specific. Furthermore, there are studies demonstrating that the same parental behavior is perceived differently by children and teenagers from different cultures. For example, in North America and Germany, parental control was related to parental hostility and rejection; in Japan, in turn, to parental warmth and acceptance (see Kagitçibaşı, 1996). One can argue that children's views of parental control may affect their self-esteem because older children view parental control as a source of information about their competence (being told what to do shows them that parents think that they are not capable to do it on their own). Sometimes, a distinction is made between two forms of control. *Behavioral control* is characterized by parental attempts to regulate children's behavior using monitoring, limiting setting and positive reinforcement (see Pomeranz & Eaton, 2000), and related to positive effects if not employed too frequently. It provides children with guidance on how to meet valued standards and shows that parents are interested in what children do. The other form of control – *psychological*, where parents

intrude their children's psychological and emotional development by constraining verbal expression, invalidating feelings, and inducing guilt – has no positive consequences. Through this type of control parents communicate that they perceive children as incompetent. The frequent use of directives by Estonian mothers seems to be rather the case of behavioral but not of psychological control. Another question is, as already told, whether older children actually need to be so frequently controlled and how they perceive it.

Thus, the important question is what is the meaning of little talk and of control for the adolescents in such cultures where it is typical of maternal talk. Preliminary studies demonstrate that for Estonian teenagers talkativeness seems not to have as high reputation and mothers' control as low reputation as in the Anglo-American context. A study with 5th, 7th and 9th grade students (Polt & Tulviste, unpublished material) showed that the Estonian adolescents perceived talkative and sociable people to be more pleasant, but not as less intelligent than quiet people. Another study (Kalda, unpublished material) showed that the Estonian students from 9th to 12th grades reporting more parental control, weren't less attached and less autonomous than the others. All findings give an impression that the family model of Estonian monocultural middle-class families is psychological interdependence, as described by Kagitçibaşı (2005).

Further considerations

Although the study revealed that the directive conversational style was typical of Estonian mothers, whereas Estonian teenagers did not demonstrate it while talking with their mothers, we cannot conclude that they will not use the pattern of conversation typical of their mothers with their own children in the future. Thus, we need longitudinal data to check whether the pattern of speech towards their future children will be similar to that of their own mothers.

Next, previous research on mothers-child interactions have demonstrated big differences in ways of talking in different situations (see Haden, & Fivush, 1996; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991). In the study reported here only mealtime con-

versations have been analyzed. To understand better language socialization across cultures, more varied interaction settings have to be studied.

Finally, investigations should be designed to continue unraveling the consequences (if any) these culturally specific language practices

have to the development of language, thought and action in children, as well as the existence and kind of consequences they could have on cross-cultural communication.

However, the optimal way of child-rearing seems to differ across countries, ethnic groups, and language communities.

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